

Introduction

North Carolina has not yet adopted the new national model certificate of live birth. We are still using the birth certificate and death certificate that were adopted in the late 1980s. Both of these certificates collect data on race via open-ended, fill-in-the-blank boxes. The birth certificate collects data on “Color or Race of Father” and “Color or Race of Mother,” usually from information provided by the mother on a worksheet in the hospital before delivery. The death certificate collects data on the race of the decedent, usually filled in by a funeral director, ideally after consultation with the family of the decedent.

The many open-ended responses to race are coded by Vital Records staff into 10 standard racial categories according to rules provided by the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS). The 10 standard, fixed racial categories are: white, black, American Indian, Chinese, Japanese, Hawaiian, Filipino, Other Asian or Pacific Islander, other race, and unknown race. Out of nearly 118,000 live births in North Carolina in 2002, mothers wrote in more than 600 different versions of race on birth certificates,¹ which were collapsed into the 10 categories. Birth certificate data are tabulated for statistical reporting by the race of the mother using the 10 standard racial categories, in keeping with the recommendation of the NCHS. In North Carolina, approximately 16 percent of live birth records are missing information on the father’s race. This is because if the mother is unmarried and no paternity affidavit has been established, then the father’s name and demographic information cannot be included on the birth certificate. Prior to about 1990, the race of both the mother and father were considered in a complex NCHS algorithm to determine the race of the child, which was usually considered to be the darker of the races of the mother and father.

On the death certificate, ethnicity is captured by a yes/no answer to the question “Was Decedent

of Hispanic Origin?” On the birth certificate, there is a yes/no response to the question of Hispanic origin for both the mother and father, which is reported by the mother while in the hospital for delivery. The birth data are usually tabulated by the Hispanic ethnicity of the mother. Approximately two-thirds of mothers of Hispanic ethnicity report their race on the birth certificate with a label that can be categorized as “other race” (often “Hispanic” is written as the race), but nearly all of these births are re-coded to “white” according to NCHS coding rules.¹

As in other states, each year North Carolina matches infant death certificates to the corresponding live birth certificates. We normally are able to successfully match 98 percent of the infant death certificates to a birth certificate. As a result of this matching process, we can jointly analyze the variables on the birth and death certificates. Prior to 1998, North Carolina created the matched birth/infant death files according to year of birth. In 1998 and later years, this matched file is oriented to the year of infant death. This is in keeping with the current practice of the NCHS, and allows completion of the matched file much earlier than before.²

This report compares race and ethnicity of the mother reported on the live birth certificates with race and ethnicity of the decedent reported on the matching infant death certificates. Infant mortality rates are calculated using mother’s race and ethnicity from the birth certificate and compared to infant mortality rates calculated using race and ethnicity from the infant death certificate. This report also compares the race/ethnicity of mother and race/ethnicity of father as reported on the live birth certificates.

Results

Table 1 shows data for 2002–2006 North Carolina infant deaths, tabulated by race/ethnicity as recorded on the death certificate compared to race/ethnicity of mother as self-reported on the birth certificate. Only North Carolina residents